

International Scholars: The Invisible Architects of Internationalisation

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☞ This paper delves into the narratives of international scholars living in Türkiye to learn first-hand about the academic, social, economic and political connections of academic mobility. Brain drain describes the mobility of people and their knowledge. In the past, economics highlighted the disparity between global economies and the detrimental effects of brain drain, calling it a “wicked problem”. Later approaches, however, present a more positive image by redefining brain drain as brain mobility and an opportunity for local economies to develop into highly desirable destinations, as in the case of Türkiye. With its expanding higher education network, Türkiye stands out as an emerging education hub, especially for scholars and students from the Middle East, Africa and Turkic Republics. The extensive body of relevant literature focuses on student mobility, pull-push variables, quality of stay and repatriation decisions; however, the voices of international scholars and their contribution to internationalisation remain underrepresented. Following a narrative approach, the findings of the present study reveal that international scholars migrate to Türkiye for academic, economic, political, social, individual and environmental reasons, and that these reasons actively affect their contribution to internationalisation practices.

Keywords: brain drain, internationalisation, international scholar, narrative

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Mednarodni strokovnjaki: nevidni arhitekti internacionalizacije

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≈ V tem članku se poglobljamo v pripovedi mednarodnih strokovnjakov, ki živijo v Turčiji, da bi s prve roke izvedeli več o socialnih, gospodarskih in o političnih povezavah akademske mobilnosti. Z izrazom beg možganov opisujemo mobilnost ljudi in njihovega znanja. V preteklosti je ekonomija poudarjala razlike med svetovnimi gospodarstvi in škodljivimi učinki bega možganov, kar je bilo razumljeno kot »hud problem«. Poznejši pristopi pa predstavljajo bolj pozitivno sliko, saj so beg možganov redefinirali kot mobilnost možganov in priložnost za lokalna gospodarstva, da se razvijejo v zelo priljubljene destinacije, kot je tudi primer Turčije. S svojo mrežo visokega šolstva, ki se čedalje bolj širi, Turčija izstopa kot nastajajoče središče izobraževanja, zlasti za strokovnjake in študente z Bližnjega vzhoda, iz Afrike in turških republik. Obsežna literatura na to temo se osredinja na mobilnost študentov ter na spremenljivke poteg – potisk (angl. *pull* – *push*), kakovost prebivanja in odločitve o vrnitvi v domovino, vendar pa glasovi mednarodnih strokovnjakov in njihov prispevek k internacionalizaciji ostajajo premalo zastopani. Skladno z narativnim pristopom ugotovitve te študije kažejo, da se mednarodni strokovnjaki selijo v Turčijo zaradi akademskih, gospodarskih, političnih, socialnih, individualnih in okoljskih razlogov, ki aktivno vplivajo na njihov prispevek k praksam internacionalizacije.

Ključne besede: beg možganov, internacionalizacija, mednarodni strokovnjak, narativni pristop

Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education has a long history. The first attempt of academic mobility dates back to the times of the foundation of the University of Bologna as the first higher education institution in the eleventh century. The first academic mobility in history was when the well-known law professor Placentinus moved to Mantua to start a law school due to his ongoing conflicts with the authorities (Rashdall, 2010). Following this, other professors as well as students, demanded better conditions and stated that they were open to opportunities. For the first time in the history of higher education, the University of Bologna had to face the threat of brain drain (Dedijer, 1969). Even in the primitive pattern of brain drain, social, economic and individual reasons seem to stand out. As a precaution to avoid loss, Bologna banned oral and written communication with the shareholders of the university about legal rights or the teaching process. Even in 1432, any attempt by students or scholars to transfer to other institutions was punishable by death. However, the law was never applied and it did not prevent former scholars of Bologna from founding the universities of Arezzo (1215), Padua (1222), Vercelli (1228), Siena (1246), Pisa (1343) and Florence (1349) (Dedijer, 1969; Rashdall, 2010). Historically, scholars have made courageous attempts to advance teaching and learning, and their concerns about societies and administration have pushed them to be part of decision-making processes for their communities and the world.

In the globalisation era, where everything – technology, the economy, values, people, knowledge, ideas – is in flux, so are scholars. The impact of globalisation on countries differs, as each nation has an individual culture, priority and identity. As defined by Knight (1999), internationalisation is a response to the globalisation of higher education institutions and takes place at the intersection of multiple study domains.

The internationalisation steps of universities worldwide can be analysed under three categories: being more global at home, abroad and at a distance (Mittelmeier et al., 2024). The goal of internationalisation at home is the incorporation of international or multicultural components into formal and informal curricula within domestic settings (Beelen & Jones, 2015). This could entail shifting towards internationalised pedagogies (Lomer & Anthony-Okeke, 2019), providing intercultural learning opportunities (Hawley et al., 2021), or internationalising the curriculum (Leask, 2009). It is sometimes viewed by domestic students as providing some of the advantages of internationalisation overseas without requiring them to leave their nation of origin.

Internationalisation abroad, the second type of internationalisation,

involves moving physically across borders (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2012). International mobility, including staff mobility (Morley et al., 2018) and programme mobility (Waterval et al., 2015) also falls within this category. The third form is internationalisation at a distance, which involves the connection and integration of programmes across borders through technology (Mittelmeier et al., 2024), in the form of branch campuses. All forms of internationalisation highlight human capital and the accompanied knowledge. Recruiting the required intellectuals, along with their knowledge and their relational and social capital, is therefore a new area for fostering knowledge production at universities.

Alemu (2020) defines the steps of internationalisation as individual, institutional and global. At the individual level, international scholars (ISs) contribute to the internationalisation practices of higher education institutions by creating more space for professional development, international reputation and establishing academic networks. At the institutional level, they facilitate change and bring more funding opportunities, as well as encouraging the internationalisation of the curriculum, understanding of the other and international cooperation. On the global level, internationalisation leads to the establishment of English as the lingua franca, cooperation, pluralism, and responding to the future challenges within higher education.

The current paper delves into the questions of internationalisation in practice. As a less represented party of internationalisation practices, ISs remain comparatively unvoiced in higher education studies. Therefore, with the general aim of learning the real-life practices of internationalisation, the life stories of ISs were collected in order to draw a comprehensive picture of internationalisation at higher education institutions in Türkiye.

Theoretical Background

The connectedness of brain drain and internationalisation

Academic mobility, which acts as a catalyst and a channel for information and knowledge transmission, is closely linked to the growth and improvement of intellectual capital in higher education. Universities must actively develop their intellectual capital, which includes relational, structural and human components, in order to create an atmosphere that is favourable to the production, exchange and application of knowledge (Giuliani, 2013). By connecting intellectual capital to graduate employability, Teichler (2011) emphasised the value of intellectual capital and the responsibility of higher education institutions to provide ideal learning environments that foster both

individual abilities and institutional strengths (Fenyés, 2021), which later turn into the requirements of the scientific job market.

Referring to the emigration of skilled workers, professionals and intellectuals, brain drain has long been discussed as a “wicked problem” (Logue, 2009) for the sending country, as it results directly in a decrease in the country’s human capital stock (Batista et al., 2025). With the right strategies, however, it is possible to turn brain drain into brain gain, leading to brain circulation. Internationalisation provides the background for the expected transformation. Internationalisation, as the growing interconnectivity of nations thanks to globalisation, and brain drain, as the emigration of highly educated and competent people, are related ideas, especially when considering migration and globalisation. Internationalisation can generate opportunities for brain gain through knowledge transfer, remittances and return migration, thus compensating for the detrimental effect on the sending nation’s human capital and growth.

In the context of the expanding knowledge economy, nations recognise that intellectual products and scholarly abilities are vital drivers of future economic growth, which is significant for the sending country’s losses. Academic mobility facilitates the exchange of ideas, best practices and innovative research across borders, which in turn enriches the intellectual capital of both departing and hosting institutions (Siekierski & Borini, 2018). Moving scholars between institutions often results in the formation of international networks, fostering knowledge transfer and collaborative research endeavours, which are crucial elements of relational capital within the broader scope of intellectual capital (Vătămănescu et al., 2022). Importantly, the internationalisation of higher education significantly amplifies these effects by promoting cross-cultural dialogue, institutional partnerships and joint research initiatives. Through international mobility programmes, academic staff and students are exposed to diverse academic cultures and practices, thus enhancing intercultural competence and broadening intellectual horizons (Knight, 2012). This process not only enriches institutional intellectual capital, but also supports the global dissemination of knowledge and innovation.

The relationship between academic mobility, internationalisation and intellectual capital is fundamental for the sustainable growth of higher education systems. By promoting mobility and international partnerships, institutions can significantly boost their intellectual capital, leading to improved educational outcomes, increased research productivity, and greater engagement with the global academic community (de Frutos-Belizón et al., 2019). However, the process of internationalisation involves complex interactions between

political institutions, academic cultures and organisational structures. In order to fully understand how these factors influence the development of intellectual capital and address the challenges of brain drain, it is essential to thoroughly explore individual, institutional and global entities (Zgaga, 2023).

The present paper is therefore designed to understand the landscape behind academic mobility from the perspectives of international scholars (ISs). In essence, global academic mobility and internationalisation are deeply interconnected drivers that shape the landscape of intellectual capital. A nuanced understanding of these dynamics is vital for harnessing the full potential of internationalisation in advancing knowledge creation, societal progress and sustainable development in higher education.

Turkish Higher Education and International Scholars

The situation of ISs is discussed in the context of internationalisation activities in Türkiye. Hosting international researchers brings political, social, economic and academic adjustments in its wake. According to Turkish law, the number of ISs, or foreign lecturers as defined by the Council of Higher Education (YÖK), cannot exceed 2% of the total number of lecturers. However, hosting more international researchers can have positive effects on higher education networks. The first is the impact of international scholars on the academic publication performance of universities. According to the British Council (2012), researchers with international experience write the most-cited research papers; countries with the highest average citation impact include Switzerland, the Netherlands, Nordic countries, the UK and the USA. Universities that host more international scholars score more highly and gain more advantages in quality rankings (Gür & Yurdakul, 2020; Ergin, 2023). Secondly, the demand for international collaboration leads to quality at the institutional level. Hence, recruiting international scholars means more capacity building and intellectual capital. In Türkiye, however, the limitations on the number of ISs is reflected in limited research. We believe that the legally binding regulations overshadow attracting and accommodating ISs, which is why the present paper aims to fill the gap in the literature of internationalisation from the perspective of international scholars. With this general aim, we examine the following questions: a) What are the political, economic, social-cultural and academic factors in the migration stories of international scholars living in Türkiye? and b) How do the international scholars living in Türkiye evaluate the internationalisation of Turkish higher education?

Method

Understanding internationalisation in action requires focusing on the interactions between the individuals and community in which they live. Grounded in the social constructivist theory, a narrative approach explores tailored identities by means of telling a story, autoethnography, biography or oral history. Bamberg (2010) explains narratives as attempts to *explain* or *normalise* what has occurred. As the process of migration includes multilayered and intricate factors, it was assumed that a narrative design could better explain the experiences of ISs. For narrative analysis, Labov (1972) states that a fully structured narrative should include the following six elements: summary (summary and/or plot of the story); setting (place, time, characters, situation); plot (plot or theme, turning point or a critical situation – in this case the decision to emigrate to Türkiye); evaluation (time for the participant to pause, reflect, appeal to their emotions, make sense of, search for the soul of the story); resolution (consequences of the event) and conclusion (end of the story, bringing everything up to date). Not all of these elements are necessarily present in every story, or they may not be mentioned in the given order. In the present study, Labov's approach was used for the analysis of the collected data.

Participants

As stated by Naderifar et al. (2017), snowball sampling – also known as the chaining method – is a very effective method for reaching people who are difficult to reach under normal conditions. In snowball sampling, the researcher selects the first few respondents, who share their views on the subject of study. These respondents then assist in establishing contact with further suitable respondents. This method saves time and enables the researcher to reach the right people. In addition, since the new participants are known to the previous participants, it can establish an environment of trust, especially among those who want to keep their identities anonymous. In the present study, we started by reaching out to ISs employed in our own university. Participation was voluntary and the participants had to have at least one year's experience of working in Türkiye, so that they could answer the questions comprehensively.

A total of 55 participants took part in the study. In order to preserve anonymity, their names were coded with numbers from 1 to 55. They originated from a diverse range of countries: 24 were from Europe (Austria, Albania, UK, France, Sweden, Italy, Germany, Cyprus, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia and Greece), 13 from the Americas (USA, Canada, Argentina and Chile), 10 from Asia (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Iran, Japan, Kazakhstan, Syria and Jordan), 5

from Africa (Algeria, South Africa and Egypt) and 3 from Australia. They were employed in 12 state universities and 10 foundation universities in different parts of Türkiye. While 88% of the participants were engaged in social sciences and the humanities, 12% worked in the area of natural sciences. The period of time they had been in Türkiye ranged from 1 to 20 years.

Data collection process

The data were collected over a four-month period, starting with the volunteers who were employed at the same university as the authors. These participants were then asked to suggest further potential volunteers to contact next. Some of the participants were interviewed face-to-face, but some preferred to communicate via online tools. Some of the interviews took place in English, while others were conducted in Turkish. A few of the participants preferred to write their own stories, as they did not feel secure in speaking English or Turkish. The interviews lasted an average of 60 minutes. The participants answered the questions following the three main parts of a narrative study. In the *before* part, the participants were asked questions such as “*What did you expect from the social and academic life in Türkiye before moving?*”; in the second part of the interview, the participants were asked about their experiences *during the time* they have been in Türkiye, such as “*During the time you have been in Türkiye, have you experienced situations in which you felt valued or accepted? Can you share a sample event/situation?*”; and in the last part, the participants evaluated their experiences in Türkiye and talked about their *future plans* by answering questions such as “*What would you suggest to international faculty members who would like to work in Türkiye?*”.

Field notes of the researchers

The researchers kept field notes during and after the interviews, and subsequently discussed opinions and suggestions, clearing up any missing or redundant parts of the interview. During the summarising step, these notes were used in analysing the narratives, which provided a second opportunity clarify the gathered data.

Data analysis

In the first step of the analysis, the life stories were transcribed by reading them through several times. The stories were then summarised and rewritten before sending them back to the narrators. Based on their feedback, some points were omitted and some more details were added, but the storyline and the milestones remained same. The third step involved organising the life stories

into three chronological periods (the time before moving to Türkiye, the time in Türkiye, and the future), while four thematic categories emerged: academic, economic, social and political. The first author made the initial coding and the second author revised the codes and categories. The only disagreement concerned the placement of the individual and environmental factors, as the interview questions were designed under four basic categories. After discussing the themes, it was agreed to supplement the original categories with an individual and environmental category, as these emerged as important during the analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Academic drives behind migration

The findings of the study show that the decisions of international academic staff to migrate to Türkiye are shaped by one or more of the following factors: career plans, trailing spouses, the world ranking of the universities to which they apply, cultural exchange, working environment and academic freedom.

I came to Türkiye for purely academic reasons. I was working, but I quit my job and came to Türkiye to achieve the academic ambitions I had in mind. First, I learned Turkish and Ottoman Turkish. I am a theologian and a linguist. My subject needs to be studied especially here. (54)

Although research on the reasons for brain drain of highly qualified individuals has quite a long history, the reasons for migration remain largely the same. The earliest studies on brain drain are a report on the reasons for the migration of 517 scientists from the UK to North America in the period 1952–64 (Committee on Manpower Resources for Science and Technology of Great Britain, 1967), as well as Rudd and Hatch's (1968) survey of 3,400 students and 678 graduates during 1957–58. Although brain drain has been actively researched for more than 50 years, the main reason is still professional gains (Khan, 2021; Vega-Muñoz et al., 2025).

The other factor that influenced the participants' choice of Türkiye as a destination for realising their career goals was university rankings and previous short visits to Türkiye. The history and world ranking of the universities to which they applied were influential in their decision-making process. References regarding university rankings influenced the decisions of the ISs surveyed, especially those who are working in well-established universities in Türkiye. The participants' comments included "I researched the best universities before I came here" (42, 49), and "My professors in the USA knew my current university

and spoke highly of the research in my field” (18). These findings align with the research of Hazelkorn (2009) and Rauhvargers (2011), which supports the significance of the impact of global rankings on higher education and knowledge production. Furthermore, Henderson (2019) emphasised that mobility helps scholars to translate their research and skills into innovative paradigms, claiming that short-term visits make researchers understand the future career trajectories of ISs. This hypothesis is supported by the findings of the present paper; for example, the participating ISs reported “I knew Türkiye, before moving” (14), and “I was in Istanbul for data collection for my research; that helped me to decide” (21). However, some of the participants who did not have any prior experience of the country stated that there is a huge difference in cultures, and that they are planning to move back to their home countries. Partly answering the first research question, these findings provide a basis for further steps in internationalisation policies.

Derrida (2002) depicts universities as truth-seekers by presenting US universities as examples of the constant struggle between power and capitalism, and the possibility of education as the practice of freedom. Higher education has always been defined by its strong connection to power (Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023; Marginson et al., 2024), in terms of its being embedded in national systems, while also acting as an independent component globally. When analysing the components of academic freedom, we therefore examined several studies in a range of countries, such as Kenya (Odhiambo, 2013), Iran (Torbay, 2002) and Nigeria (Ekundayo & Adedokun, 2009). These studies demonstrated that, as in the Turkish context, migration is closely related to academic freedom. ISs who had migrated to Türkiye from Algeria, Palestine, Iran and Egypt stated that they chose Türkiye because of the academic freedom that Turkish higher education offers for them and their fields of study. For example:

(48): The syllabus of the course I would teach and the number of countries I would visit were determined by them.

Researcher: Who are they?

(48) People, walls, telephones, everything... If I said something in one place, the next day I could hear my own words from someone who was not there, so that’s what you think. We were living with agents everywhere.”

Another participant shared a similar experience:

Once I wanted to access a document. There was a letter, a letter written by the Prophet Muhammad to the Emperor Heracles, a historical

document. This document is in Jordan; it is the property of the King. I did a lot of correspondence. I wrote letters to the people concerned. I said I just wanted to see it, that it was part of my research, but three weeks passed. Then one day the phone rang. It was someone who said he was from the Jordanian Intelligence service, and he said I was not authorised to access this document and hung up. I was shocked. (47)

On the other side of the coin, there is evidence showing that the search for academic freedom is a reason for Turkish academics to emigrate (Elveren, 2018; Erdogan, 2003; Pazarçık, 2010). We therefore agree with Deniz (2020) that Türkiye can be considered a paradise for scholars who have nowhere better to go. As the findings of the present study show, the Turkish higher education system can be perceived as a growing force that needs to be supported with appropriate policies.

Cultural and social expectations

According to the findings of the present study, social factors are very strong among the ISs living in Türkiye. The recurring social patterns in the life stories of the participants were identified as individual reasons, family life, desire for a change in lifestyle, curiosity about culture and cultural ties. As an individual characteristic of migration, the way people approach migration is an important factor determining the destination. Their approach encompasses differences that shape the direction and duration of their mobility. Teferra (2005) categorises these differences into two main groups. In line with the findings of his longitudinal research, Teferra states that while some scholars decide to move at a certain period of their lives, another group is constantly on the move. For scholars in the second group, changing countries or cities has become an ordinary event; there is no country of origin that gains or loses these scholars, who are constantly on the move. Teferra's categories regarding mobility are supported by the findings of the present research. For some of the participants, Türkiye was one of several destination countries, while for others, migration to Türkiye was the only migration decision they had made in their lives. Some narratives from the participants are as follows:

I'm actually an immigrant since 1975. I'm old. I was born in 1950. I'm in my 70s. I left the UK in 1974. My family was Irish, now Irish-British. I worked in North Africa, Spain, France, Switzerland. I went back to North Africa. I went back to England for a while. I was a consultant in Africa for a long time and I worked in Southeast Asia, and I decided to come here when I was 42. (56)

In the meantime, I was making preparations for Europe, a friend of mine came and told me that there were scholarships for Turkey. I sent the forms ... five months later I got the news that I was selected. The mail that came was my salvation, I was very happy. (21)

From the social perspective, migration and network theories suggest that migration is influenced by economic, cultural or political ties between countries (Yalçın, 2004). Ovchinnikova et al. (2023) also present evidence for the significance of language and academic proximity in academic mobility decisions. These macro-level relationships can create cultural ties through the presence of a community of migrants from another country within the destination country. The cultural or social networks that are formed can strengthen the relations between the origin and destination countries and arouse curiosity about the target culture. These networks can also facilitate the migration decisions of scholars. For example, one participant shared the story behind their decision to move:

We thought that only Muslim countries can be Malaysia, Indonesia, Türkiye, and we would not go to the West. This decision was not based on academic considerations. I preferred Muslim countries because culture is very important for us. Turkish culture is Muslim in nature, a bit closed. I have to look for a place to pray, but if I were in the West, I would have to explain Islam to them again. When I release my child, society teaches him something. If the country is not Muslim, the child lives like in the West. (53)

Thanks to the cultural ties created, individuals who want to migrate can feel that they are not alone in solving problems related to family life (Abadan-Unat, 2002; Yalçın, 2004). The findings of the present study reveal that especially ISs who migrated to Türkiye from Muslim countries find Islam to be an attractive factor as a shared common value. In addition to viewing their work – teaching the language of Islam – as a sacred duty, it is clear that these scholars prefer Türkiye due to holding on to the idea that Türkiye's social values will not conflict with the values they are used to.

Regardless of the factors that push individuals to migrate (economic, political, climate, individual motivation, etc.), migration is directly related to social life in terms of its causes or consequences. The participants' skills in adapting to social life can be a factor in their decision to stay or leave, while the biggest factor affecting the ease of adaptation is language proficiency.

Another challenge is language. When I went to the earthquake zone, I really wanted to speak Turkish. I came to this country, to this city, to eliminate the destructive effects of the earthquake and when I saw the people who suffered from the earthquake, I felt that my work here was not finished. For example, on the night of the earthquake, the apartment building collapsed across the street from me. While the aftershocks continued, I examined that there was no danger, but I could not go to people and tell them that. I could not express that I wanted to be with them. I found a way to go into my house and leave all the lights on for a few nights so that they would understand that there was no danger and they could go into their homes. (44)

Vinke et al. (2020) define adaptation as success in mediating environmental risks. The findings of the present research also reveal that the participants make use of values, beliefs and cultural or individual commonalities in order to adapt successfully to their environments. The opposite case is demonstrated by Adger and Barnett (2005) and Adger et al., (2011), who argue that migration is not successful when it is perceived to threaten or damage the individual's traditions, intellectual capital, identities and social expectations. Hence, the findings of the present research align with the existing literature on the challenges in the social perspective of migration. It could also be argued that migration plays an equalising role among migrants in presenting similar social challenges regardless of their level of education or their socioeconomic background.

Economics is not the main force

The economic situation in Türkiye has an impact on the decisions of ISs living in the country to repatriate. Some scholars stated that the economic situation in Türkiye is unstable and insufficient to compensate for their work. One of the participants sarcastically commented: "I like chaos and I can cope with a certain level of poverty. Türkiye is good at creating chaos and paying less to those who do their job well, that's what I heard and I came" (11). Another participant stated: "I knew that Türkiye was not stable politically and economically" (39). Most of the participants expressed agreement with the idea: "Even if I wanted to, it is financially impossible for me to return to my country right now. My life is here" (7). They mentioned the financial obstacles to re-establishing life in another country; for example, "I don't feel like I have such strong ties with any country. It is impossible for my husband to find a job in my country, so I stay in Türkiye" (22).

Several studies on migration present evidence that people migrate for better economic conditions (Raventstein, 1889; Valiuniene, 2016; Studer, 2025). The present study not only supports the theory that people migrate for better economic opportunities, but also contributes to the literature by adding that after spending many years abroad, it becomes more difficult to re-enter the home country's job market and community. This leads to further discussion about the sustainability of mobility in an academic career.

Escaping from pressure and bureaucracy

In the wider region, including the European Higher Education Area, the European Union is the guarantor of four fundamental freedoms: free movement of goods, services, capital and people (Dumbrava, 2020). The right of individuals to travel freely, which is emphasised by the United Nations (United Nations, 2022), is seen to be interrupted in extraordinary situations such as war, epidemics or disasters. As mentioned above, migration is a complex process that requires considering many factors together. However, the aforementioned compelling circumstances are powerful factors that can make individuals decide to migrate on their own, regardless of other factors.

The Ahmadinejad administration was problematic. In 2010, I received an invitation from a university in Germany [...] they asked me if I would come and teach this course in the summer school. I said yes. I flew to Frankfurt via Türkiye, but something strange happened at the airport, they deemed my passport invalid. They even pierced it so it wouldn't be used. As a result, I was detained. I could not enter the country, the reason given was that I travelled too much, as if I had mafia connections. I gave lectures in China, Oslo, I wrote the most widely read books in my field in Iran, but they did this to my passport. I waited until I got my new passport and I ran away. (50)

In addition to political pressure in the home country, some participants stated that bureaucratic processes and legal documents are challenging in Türkiye. Just after the release of a document stating that international scholars must speak Turkish at B2 level, one participant criticised the regulation:

We are going through very difficult times in Türkiye right now. YÖK is changing the rules without even informing us. In order to get a residence permit, we need to speak Turkish at B2 level. Who would come here if there is such a condition before coming here? We are

competent professors in our field. Besides, we chose this university as it is a university that has been teaching in our mother tongue for years. (4)

The findings highlight two notable dimensions of the experience of ISs in Türkiye. First, the country's political and cultural environment provides a form of security for ISs seeking to preserve their cultural identities. Second, the increasing complexity of bureaucratic procedures and heightened institutional expectations suggests that the Turkish higher education system is in the process of navigating its direction in the international network of higher education institutions.

Individual and environmental factors

Several participants stated that their decision to move to Türkiye was personal, which supports the findings of Günbey & Karakütük (2024) that an academic career is ignited by an inner curiosity.

I wanted to go to different places, to discover new places. When I was young, I travelled a lot, I met people. My motivation has always been to explore new environments. I was very bored with England, because I'm originally from Ireland, and the English and the Irish are quite different. I didn't want to spend the rest of my life working in the UK. (46)

While some of the participants accept being an immigrant, others touched upon the recurring theme of "bubble": "I am happy in my little bubble, we are a little English-speaking community, I love my bubble" (14). Berry (1997) describes the tendencies of participants in a bubble – who find themselves in a limited environment, living mostly in their own language and culture – as an example of limited adaptation. These bubbles, which are considered as social groups brought together by common social and cultural capital (Çağlayan, 2006), can be likened to the deaf culture. Characterised by contentment and pride in being a cultural and linguistic minority (Ladd, 2003), these participants are content with their decision to be in Türkiye, but keep their connections within their small bubbles.

McCowan (2023) suggests deepening the understanding of existing disciplinary divisions and mainstream epistemologies, reflection, pushing boundaries and opening imagination in higher education settings. Similarly, the present paper proposes that climate and environmental conditions, which are relatively new in the migration literature, are factors in the migration decisions of the participants. Türkiye's natural beauty, history, mild climate and location

in the Mediterranean basin were attractive factors for many participants. Especially in recent years, migration movements due to climate change have increased, and strong economies that can manage these changes with appropriate and stable policies have been able to manage the socioeconomic stress in society (An et al., 2021). The results obtained by previous research are largely in line with the findings of the present research; however, the opinions of participants differ with regard to economics. Although the economic conditions offered in the Gulf countries were more satisfactory for the participants of Arab origin, these scholars prefer to live in Türkiye, which has a milder climate. This supports the findings of McAdam (2012), which differ from the study by An et al. in this respect. McAdam states that the economic, social and political capacities of countries, as well as infrastructure, political stability and the support they offer to individuals to build a new life, directly affect the mobility decision.

Conclusion

Several studies have demonstrated that people migrate for better economic conditions (Ravenstein, 1889; Valiuniene, 2016; Studer, 2025). In addition to bolstering the idea that people migrate in search of better economic opportunities, the present research adds to the body of literature by pointing out that economics is not the only factor in academic mobility. On the other hand, it becomes increasingly challenging for ISs to reintegrate into the community and job market of their native country after living overseas for a long time. This brings a further discussion about the sustainability of mobility in an academic career. Another perspective emerging from the literature is Teferra's (2005) categorisation of two main groups, highlighting the fact that while some ISs choose to relocate during specific stages of their lives, others are always on the move. Supported by the findings of the current study, this indicates the need for a closer examination of sustainable factors and the structures of higher education institutions in terms of supporting mobility.

Apart from economic factors, the present study adds to the literature regarding the importance of cultural bonds and similarities in mobility decisions. Building on Ovchinnikova et al. (2023), this paper shows that religious and cultural similarities, along with language and cultural proximity, influence the destination for academic mobility. The participants refer to similarities as factors that attract them to and keep them in Türkiye. Conversely, differences in the social lives, infrastructure and facilities of the guest cities or universities emerged as detracting factors.

Another detracting factor might be cited as “using international scholars”

in marketing and internationalisation. ISs, who are aware of their active role in the marketing and internationalisation activities of their universities, evaluated the current situation and made suggestions for future studies in order to create brand value and increase the competitiveness of their universities (Eriçok et al., 2024). However, some participants use the term “marketing tool” to describe their roles in their universities.

In terms of adaptation to the host country and institutions, the participating ISs identified language proficiency, similarities and differences between the origin and destination cultures, gender roles and the socio-academic environment as issues that they confronted both in their social lives and in their professional experiences. The findings regarding the narratives of the ISs show that while some of them see Türkiye as their new home, for others it is a temporary stopover. Either way, ISs can be productive when they are supported in the mobility process undertaken concerning their professional development. Individuals can become effective actors of internationalisation when their competencies are aligned with the university for which they work. At this point, academic culture is effective. Higher education institutions that are able to provide an accepting, tolerant and collaborative academic environment that offers opportunities to develop the capacity of individuals have been able to realise their institutional goals and support the academic development of their academic staff. In future studies, we suggest focusing on academic mobility and brain drain with regard to the economic, cultural and political background of peripheral countries. We also suggest that, as “outsiders”, ISs have more objective ideas on gender equality, enculturation, integration strategies and child brokering. The combination of the diffusionist effect of migration and the fact that migrants are more entrepreneurial in the countries where they reside has led to the finding that they pass on these characteristics to their families. Future research may address the existence and methodology of this kind of cultural transmission.

Ethical Statement

Ethical permission for the research was granted by Giresun University ethics Committee on 31.12.2020, with issue no. 80287700-302.08.01-142153.

Disclosure statement

There is no conflict of interest among the authors.

Data availability statement

The data is kept by the first author and is available upon request from reviewers.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank each of our participants for sharing very personal stories of their own lives.

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